

Godspeed to Citizens' Groups

FORMATION of four citizens' motivation groups to pursue relevant government agencies and co-operate with them towards bringing about some order to the capital city's tyrannical traffic, in our view, is a step in the right direction. Indeed there is a scope for cynicism given the committee syndrome the government has become prone to. More often than not, these committees had come up with sets of recommendations that were never to be implemented. True, some recommendations were lofty and quixotic, detached from reality; but, in most cases, it was the absence of political will that buried the proposal beneath dust. This time around, though, the formation process followed a logical path. First, the problems were identified, then solutions sought and finally relevant agencies specified who would actually take care of the implementation phase. The four groups would monitor progress of implementation and check it out with agencies concerned. Naturally, that would work up extra pressure on the government apparatus to execute the plans put forth. Composition of the groups also has the touch of prudence, mixing government officials and members of the civil society into fairly well-balanced composite teams.

But what makes the whole idea plausible and promising is the area-specific approach to the capital city's traffic problems. The problem areas chosen — illegal parking and dearth of parking spaces in the commercial areas — are indeed compounding the woe for the commuters. In this regard, the RAJUK chief engineer's admission to the fact that two of the five designated parking lots have been taken over by illegal occupants also point to the criminal aspect of the whole problem. However, as Monday's follow-up workshop on *Traffic Problems in Dhaka City* stressed Motiheel does need multi-storied parking complexes. Illegal parking is a factor indeed, but a minor one compared to the telling inadequacy of infrastructure.

However, ultimately it would be the level of sincerity and commitment that would eventually make the desired difference. We earnestly hope that involvement of the civic society in the effort would ensure that, too.

Killers at Large?

TOLSTOI wrote, when sons bury their fathers, it is peace, when fathers bury their sons, it is war. Fathers are burying their young sons and mothers' laps are being emptied by killers in our country. They are getting away with their crimes because they are close to power. Killers move around in localities where they committed their crimes in front of several people intimidating the parents and families of the unfortunate victims, only to be declared absconders by the police whose moral responsibility and professional obligation were to arrest the culprit at the first opportunity. Families of Rubel, Moiza, Tuhin, Sajal, brothers Jewel and Rebel of Mohammadpur and the latest one, Shipu of Banani among several others who were brutally murdered but whose killers are at large wait with a heavy heart for justice but in vain. If these people were politically influential the killers of their near and dear ones would be nabbed in a jiffy and produced before the court. But that was not to be because the unfortunate parents of these young men do not belong to the so-called elite class of politicians or members of political power groups. Relatives of powerful MPs, son of a minister and, now a son of an MP could 'not be traced or arrested.' The list goes on and on. It is only the wearer who knows where his shoe pinches.

Fiji's Moment of Truth

FIRST, a democratically elected government was ousted in a coup, then the military came in to do more harm to Fiji — a country where some 44 per cent of the population are ethnic Indians. They first came to the Pacific Ocean islands in the 19th century to work in sugar plantations. The Fijian army on Monday declared that it was assuming executive powers following the mayhem caused in the May 19 coup by a small group of gunmen — led by George Speight who had taken the elected Prime Minister Mahendra Pal Chaudhry and a few of his ministers hostage in the parliament. The military strongman, Commodore Bainimarama, has named Ratu Epeli Nailatikau as interim prime minister and provided Speight immunity to prosecution. The military also scrapped the multi-ethnic constitution adopted in 1997, which had allowed the first ethnic Indian prime minister to take power.

As the crisis continues, international condemnation is mounting. Commonwealth foreign ministers are due to meet in London next week to discuss their response to the crisis in Fiji. The country was suspended from the Commonwealth after a military coup in 1987. It rejoined the organisation only in 1997. If the Fijian military does not revert to democracy soon enough, it could invite sanctions from the international community.

This episode sets a very bad precedent, not only in Fiji but also for global politics, especially in the third world. In all democratic societies, the government and the opposition, amidst differences, must work together for the welfare of the nation. Earlier Fiji's democracy is on the line. With Pakistan and Nigeria already under military rule Fiji is yet another country in the Commonwealth to have gone that way. If this trend continues in the Commonwealth, then we certainly have dark days ahead. Let Fijian pretenders to power come back to sanity sooner than later.

"I would like the vice president to resign from his office and become the prime minister." This was what former president Venkataraman told me when the country was looking for a leader who could head a viable coalition. This was about 10 years ago. Shankar Dayal Sharma was the then vice president.

That we should think of a system whereby the prime minister, once elected, is allowed to complete his five-year term" were the words of prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, then in the opposition. He too could not envisage a situation where a government would be above the blackmail of capricious MPs.

Governments those days rose and fell so quickly that India began to be compared with France and Italy of old times when there were bets on how long a government would last. In the later half of the nineties, Delhi saw four governments in three years with as many elections.

Political conditions or, to put it more bluntly, political configurations, have today changed so vastly that even gossipsheets have stopped writing about the exit of the Vajpayee government. It looks as if the BJP or, at least Vajpayee looks irreparable. The NDA may not have done anything spectacular but it does not show any chink. The outburst by defence minister George Fernandes against economic reforms should not be taken too seriously. He made a fervent case in

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defence of the Morarji Desai government but resigned from his government the following day.

Some parties in the NDA — there are as many as 24 — may voice their differences with the major partner, the BJP, on the slashing of subsidies or the raising of essential commodities' price. But the criticism remains at such a low key that it is 'managed' even before it hits the headlines.

The two main factors which have strengthened the BJP-led government are: one, the absence of an alternative; and two, the BJP's appreciation of the coalition politics. It is difficult to say which of the two has helped the government more to stay in office. But the situation would have been different if Mrs Sonia Gandhi, president of the other major party, the Congress, had posed a challenge or if the BJP had behaved in the same manner as it did when it fell after being 13 days in office.

When the opposition parties united to throw out the Vajpayee government even by one vote, it was the most opportune time to forge unity. Ideological concurrence in the wake of Babri Masjid's demolition could have become the basis of an alternative. Both the Congress and the Communists bungled and destroyed the unity. The Communists are more to blame because

they tried to put the Congress in the gaddi exclusively. True, Sonia Gandhi wanted it that way. But they could have explained to her that some of the non-BJP parties, which had fought the Congress all their life, had come round to support her to stall the BJP. The Communists should not have pressurised them to forego participation in the governance.

Expecting them to give up their share in the government was like asking them to wear

clad widow of Rajiv Gandhi, would take the country by storm. But her Italian nationality came in the way. Also, the novelty disappeared when she occupied the stage. There was a feeling of let-down when she would read from the podium a short prepared speech in English. She was accepted as the Congress president but not as India's prime minister.

Yet an opportunity came Sonia Gandhi's way. She failed to muster the 272 members she

and Article 370 giving special status to Jammu and Kashmir. The RSS, the BJP's mentor, has been able to silence the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal on these subjects.

There is also an understanding among the BJP ministers not to entertain any appointment or step relating to a state without consulting the ally in the region. For example, Home Minister L.K. Advani made it clear the other day to a Sikh delegation that he would not act on their demand without consulting Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal. The same holds good for Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Karunanidhi in Tamilnadu and Navin Patnaik in Orissa.

More than that, the BJP does not allow differences to grow between the party and its allies. When Mamata Banerjee made a specific number of seats for her Trinamul Congress in local body elections an issue, she had her way. Vajpayee intervened to stave off the crisis in the face of such tactics by the BJP, the Congress, the communists and the other parties outside the NDA, are thinking how to challenge the government. There is nothing wrong about it. But, the surprising part is that many are missing Mrs Indira Gandhi and that too at a time when the authoritarian rule she imposed on

the country through the emergency will be 25 years old this June. Her rough and ready methods to pull down the Janata Party government are recalled. It only reflects a state of helplessness. It also indicates that the third front is only a pious hope.

Still, however placid the profile of the NDA, a wrong impression of solidarity is being spread by the BJP leaders. Beneath the surface, there is discontent because of overposturing of some BJP ministers and oversaffroning of their activities. A few NDA constituents say that they are willing to quit their predicament is that there is no rallying point, within the NDA or without.

The Congress is diminishing day by day or 'facing a crisis of confidence' as the Congress *Sandesh*, the party's journal, puts it. On the other hand, there is very little hope of the third front emerging, whatever the efforts by West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu. The very idea has lost its appeal.

The real danger that the Vajpayee government faces is on the economic front. Poverty is increasing and so is unemployment. Inflation is around 7 per cent, three times more than a few months ago. Economic reforms are being targeted for the situation. The opposition parties, except the Congress, want to build up an agitation against the globalisation. But, ironically, they find that the only organisation which feels as strongly on the subject as they do is the RSS. Then how do they build an alternative?

Indian President's Visit to China: An Appraisal

by Harun ur Rashid

It is an admitted perception that both countries appear incapable of dissipating the suspicion and ill-will which infected their relations in the aftermath of Sino-Indian border war in 1962. The alleged occupation of each other's territory on the Himalayas continues to be the bone of contention.

INDIA'S President K.R. Narayanan is making a week-long trip to China commencing from 28 May. The visit has been described as one of the most important steps to heal the wounds in their bilateral relationship. Being a former Ambassador to China the erudite President is quite familiar with the power-play of the political system in China. In diplomatic terms one could say that the visit is to reciprocate the one undertaken to India by China's President in 1996.

Without diminishing the significance of the visit, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that the President is the ceremonial head of India. He is not the head of the government and therefore executive power does not vest in him under India's constitution while Chinese President Jiang Zemin is not only the head of the State but of the government in China.

The visit of a ceremonial head of a state does take place with a considerable preparation with the full agreement of the government in power. In this case the government led by Prime Minister Vajpayee (a former Foreign Minister during Prime Minister Morarji Desai's term in late 70s) is assumed to have approved the visit. Prior to the President's visit, India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh visited Beijing and the meetings were described in the media as fruitful.

Political observers believe that the purpose of the President's visit could be to test the political temperature of China so as to enable the Prime Minister Vajpayee to undertake a visit to China in future. Second, the visit will help ease relations with China when India's relations with Pakistan has deteri-

orated with the military regime. One thumb rule in foreign policy is that a country could not afford to be unfriendly with two neighbours at the same time.

In the light of the above it is desirable to examine the common interests and differences between the two giants of Asia in the present regional and international environment. This may provide a realistic assessment of what one could expect the outcome of the visit to be.

Convergence of Interests

Both India and China appear to be uncomfortable with the bipolar world. The US has been the only superpower after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The US seems to call all the shots in international or regional security matters. NATO led forces under the command of the US General waged war against Yugoslavia last year without the approval of the UN. Although there are arguments to justify such action on humanitarian grounds, both India and China opposed the military action. There is a view that both countries viewed the situation from their domestic perspectives — India for Kashmir situation and China for Tibet/Taiwan position.

It appears therefore that both countries have strategic interests to see that the role of the US may not sweep all over

the world, in particular in Asia-Pacific region. If India and China can come to some understanding on the role of the US vis a vis their involvement in Asia Pacific, it might help curb the power of the US in the region.

There is a view that Taliban controlled Afghanistan has been exporting 'terrorism' in Central Asia including Chechnya (Russia). India suspects that some of the Muslim militants trained in Afghanistan have embraced religious solidarity with the Kashmiris who have been fighting in the Indian-administered Kashmir. In Central Asia, a group of militants infiltrated in Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan, neighbours of China. China has been facing simmering unrest from the Muslims in the adjoining province of Xinjiang. In 1996-97 it was reported that the authorities cracked down on the agitators and over 100 Uighurs were killed following a riot in February 1997.

Both India and China want to ensure that terrorism does not destabilise the volatile areas in their territory. Pakistan is the only country in South Asia which has accorded recognition to Taliban regime. It is alleged that Taliban is being supported by Pakistan-backed ultra-orthodox Islamic militia. The presence of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen in Pakistan which was allegedly responsible for

the hijacking of Indian airlines from Kathmandu in December 1999 does not bring comfort either to India or China.

Strategic analysts maintain that 'terrorism' is another matter of common concern. In this context there is a perception that Pakistan has been asserting Islamisation in both domestic and foreign policies and a common position could be co-ordinated towards Pakistan.

In economic terms both China and India need to cooperate in the era of globalisation. Furthermore, China is expected to become a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the trade in China will be regulated by WTO rules. Both China and India may derive economic benefits by increasing cooperation in areas of their expertise and specialisation. At the forthcoming Seattle round of negotiations under WTO both countries will be involved and a common position would be powerful in WTO meetings.

Differences

India and China wish to play dominant role in Asia Pacific. Both have the size, populations and resources. Both are nuclear powers. However their security interests differ markedly.

There is a view that India sees China as 'the mother' of all its security concerns from the Gulf of Bengal to the Persian Bay. Indian strategic analysts

identified China in their assessment of India's security interests. One can reasonably conclude from the statements of Indian leaders that the principal purpose of the conduct of nuclear tests by India in May 1998 was an attempt to correct the asymmetry of military power between the two countries.

Furthermore there is a perception that China has armed Pakistan to build up a counter-vailing force to India in South Asia. Some Indian analysts hold the view that a key strategic objective is to 'involve Myanmar (Burma) in China's strategy for the 21st century. This implies that India will be tied down to the south of Himalayas and thereby prevent its rise as a major challenger to China's primacy of the Asia-Pacific region.

It is interesting to note that India has increased its defence budget by 28 per cent this financial year. It is the biggest ever increase in national military spending in India. At the same time China is reported to expand its military equipment by purchasing a deep water fleet and proposes to buy a Russian aircraft carrier. It is reported that China will spend extra \$14 billion to counter nuclear attack. *Jane Defence Weekly's* Asia correspondent reported that the programme of China to develop effective second strike

capabilities had been under way for a long time.

It is an admitted perception that both countries appear incapable of dissipating the suspicion and ill-will which infected their relations in the aftermath of Sino-Indian border war in 1962. The alleged occupation of each other's territory on the Himalayas continues to be the bone of contention and this dispute clouded in the past the attempt to normalise the bilateral relations. Several intermittent meetings were held during the period of nearly 38 years to settle the border dispute but it remains unresolved. The refuge of the Dalai Lama in India appears to be another irritant to China. China considers India's action an interference in its internal matter while India claims that its land has been always open for refugees from time immemorial and it is bound by the time-honoured tradition.

Conclusion

The above paragraphs will indicate that Indo-China relations are complex and dominated partly by thorny issues for more than three decades. The spirit of *'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai'* was marred by suspicions and misgivings on each other. Unless the core issues affecting their relations are addressed, the pendulum of relations is likely to oscillate between sweetness and bitterness. However the visit has opened a new process, although its pace may proceed at its glacial pace. Any forward movement between the two giants is better than no movement for the sake of peace in the region and by extension in the world.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Should the PM hanker after everything?

Sir, Should the PM hanker after 'opening' of each and every building, road, lane, by-lane of the country? The sycophants always look for such opportunities but the PM should be aware of these 'chamchas'.

The other day I read a news item and saw a photograph of traffic congestion in your esteemed daily and got shocked to learn that the small patch of road (the renovated bridge) connecting Rd. 32 and Rd. 8A in Dharmundi was kept partly blocked awaiting inauguration (actually to be re-opened) by the PM! Or it was also awaiting to be renamed after the father of the nation!

This is really frustrating that a PM of a country has time and luxury to go for reopening of tiny patch of road in the city! It is in fact a shameful event for the relevant agency to keep such a busy thoroughfare for such senseless proposition.

A citizen
Dhaka

Time to be tough

Sir, The local press is aflame with stories of India's intransigence in not allowing export of Bangladeshi commodities to India as per paper agreement. Officially the delaying tactics of India has been noted more than once.

If a peaceful public campaign to boycott local purchase of Indian goods is launched by the

local consumers, this neighbour of ours might take some notice. GoB may change its soft stance with the big neighbour, to reduce the huge trade imbalance, which is increasing instead of reducing year after year.

The government may go for tough bargaining. On the other hand, Indian investment is being invited officially in the power generation sector (press report, May 24) for exporting electricity to India. GoB's policy towards India should be made clear to the public, to avoid misunderstanding.

A.M.A.
Dhaka.

The political tug-of-war

Sir, The distant view from Vancouver (DS, Opinion, May 25) may be slightly different from first-hand view of a locally resident observer. The devil is not the historical context. If AL give late General Zia the due credit he had his negative side, as had Sk Mujib during the post '71 period, then most probably BNP might reciprocate, thereby removing a big stumbling block in the way of invigorated nationhood.

The anti-liberation and the fundamentalist images have been blown up too much, seen in perspective three decades later. Should marginal issues be touted as core issues?

The fight for freedom is in several phases, not simply the 9-month war. The wounds have to be healed, and the gaps

ironed out. This stage is being delayed, due to political instability and sensitivity. The nation's psyche has to be grasped in the right perspective.

It is time the politicians decide that the period of honeymoon is over, and let the present set the course for the future. Raking the past never yielded many dividends in any part of the world, as the study of history would reveal. Our problem is the approach, not tinkering with the nuts and bolts.

We have political leadership, but lack in statesmanship of the highest order. Except for the political impasse, Bangladesh can easily cross the rest of the development hurdles, as the progress in the '90s revealed. Perhaps we are waiting for some catalyst at the take-off point.

An observer
Dhaka.

Medical check-up of MPs

Sir, We have lost ten MPs in the last few years, which is a cause of bereavement to the families. On the other hand a death means a by-election too, which translated causes expenditure from the taxpayers' money and, indirectly, a law and order situation.

In order to avoid such situation, all the political parties should be advised by the authorities concerned not to put up candidates who are too old, of ill health or otherwise medically unfit. The incumbent should also undergo complete medical check-up before being given the ticket and six monthly medical check-up should be made mandatory for the elected MPs. There had been too many obituary references in the last few months.

Dr. Syed Nasrullah
Bara Magbazar,
Dhaka

Tejgaon Airport

Sir, Recently, an interesting report appeared in the national dailies regarding the opening of Tejgaon as a domestic airport. I applaud the government decision in this regard.

The Tejgaon airfield consisting of huge open stretch of land is a national asset. However, some vested quarters have been trying to grab a part of this 'real estate' for quite some time. And as I recall, blocks of Tejgaon were planned to be sold off to housing estates and shopping complexes during the autocratic regime.

The total length and breadth of the Tejgaon runway is the same as that of ZIA. If the entire runway is repaired and re-carpeted, if necessary in stages, not only could it be turned into an excellent domestic airport, but would also suffice as an alternate for emergencies. Indeed only recently, a Biman DC-10 blocked the ZIA runway for about six hours after failing to get airborne causing widespread disruption to both incoming and outgoing flights. Sometime before this incident, a Malaysian airlines Boeing 747 kept the airfield closed for over twelve hours after it developed a nose wheel problem during take-off, resulting in at least a dozen international and domestic incoming flights to divert to other aerodromes.

In exigencies such as above, another runway at close proximity to ZIA could be extremely useful. Customs and Immigration could be completed by a smaller, skeleton staff there, or bus the passengers and baggage to and from ZIA under Customs/Immigration escort.

Regarding doubts about flight safety as raised by GMG and Parabat, these are superfluous. For the small aircraft operated by these domestic airlines, the Tejgaon runway even with its present operational dimensions pose no problem at

all, and are well within flight safety limitations. However, to accommodate big jets, the permanent rostrum constructed for ceremonial purposes, have to be removed and if necessary a temporary one may be constructed for use as and when necessary. The present apron area can easily accommodate four large jets, dismantling the dilapidated hangers would allow the accommodation for four more.

I would request that experts to study the matter in detail and advise concerned departments appropriately so that we can have a fully operational emergency alternate runway for ZIA and an airport for the increasing number of domestic passengers in the near future.

Quamrul Hassan
146, Siddheswari
Dhaka

Rain drops

Sir, I was glad that none other than our PM expressed the urgency of harnessing the rain water resource in a recent national level forum. This was much over due.

I vividly recall a stormy night in an isolated Cambodian village not so long before. I was awoken by a lot of running around, shouting and shuffling by my neighbours which at first I mistook to be another of those ghastly inter-group shoot out which were so frequent those days. But it turned out to be different. My Khmer neighbours — young and old were all busy collecting the rainwater in whatever container they could lay their hands on. Those rain-water were so precious to them. Later I was told that their houses are designed to collect and store the rainwater and this is the only source in most places to last them for the entire year.

Things are far different in our country. We have plenty of rain, much of which goes unutilized. We neither care nor wish to learn the technology. Our indifference or ignorance is no excuse. It is time we understand and act accordingly. I draw special attention of those who could would pioneer. Can this be a 'welcome rain' project in our country?

Tanzia Choudhury
Chittagong

The usual mess they are into

Sir, The half-yearly exams in most English-medium schools are knocking at the door. But what really bothers me is the 'intentional' mismanagement these schools go through at these times.

I, being a house tutor, am familiar with the way the English-medium schools are treating the students. After taking a lot of money from them, the schools forget what their duties are. What is most frustrating and equally annoying is the fact that lengthy syllabuses are given in every subject without a thought of completion time. And the parents aware of this and are the school authorities awake? Are these schools incapable of finishing the syllabus given by themselves? If they are then why do they burden the students with such lengthy syllabuses?

What was more amazing was the class routine given in two renowned schools — two exams per day! Two subjects including largely untaught contents! I await the time when the school authorities would wake up from their slumber of impracticality and think about the students rather than their 'so-called' high standards.

Noushad bin Rahman
Siddheswari, Dhaka